

THE SUN NEVER SETS



by Brian E. Drake

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Being Chapter 17 of the Memoirs of
Jerky Pete, Absolute Last of the Old-Time
Adventurer-Explorers

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Which was how he introduced himself, in a cloud of tequila and a spray of nacho crumbs. “Got the taste for these eats when I was down in Mexico digging up pyramids.” He should have been holding court in a dark, smoky, waterfront saloon; but the bar on Ninth Avenue had gone trendy, with aquamarine paneling and curlicue fries and beers from Vietnam. “I like the fries, but these blue corn chips are pitiful. And I miss the beer. They had real beer here in the old days. And the prices were better. Right over there, where that recessed light thing is, was an autographed photo of old Mer Cooper hisself. You’d think that’d be just the kind of crap these

upscale bohos would hold onto. No such thing as respect anymore. Or savvy.”

His name was Avram Petalinsky, but that was too much for his pals to spit out after the third pitcher, so Pete it was. And with the passing of years and the passing of booze, his skin had grown as dark and wrinkled as his favorite camp food. Jerky Pete was the result. “Got to have a moniker in my line of work,” he said. “Could’ve worked a little harder on mine, but hell, I was too busy shark fishing off Easter Island or discovering the lost treasure of Tamerlane to worry about a goddamn name.”

I’ve been visiting with Jerky Pete about once a week for at least five years. After a couple of piña coladas he tells me great yarns of his action-packed life exploring the farthest corners of the globe. A couple more drinks, and he tells me about his adventures on Venus and the moons of Mars. And a few drinks later I have to haul his wasted self out of the aquamarine wasteland before the gym-pumped bouncer flexes his pecs. With all the stories he’s told me, I could have been a great pulp writer. But pulp is dead, the millennium’s passed us by, and I get sizeable grants to compose

exquisite examinations of upper-class ennui for the nonpaying lit journals. Life's rough all around.

It was summer, and the spandex crowd who had moved into the neighborhood and driven up the rents were sipping Tsing Tao and laughing photogenically. Jerky Pete was propped at his post at the end of the bar, opposite the unisex toilets and as far as possible from the video wall. Who needed atmosphere? Pete carried it around with him. Wherever he was became the dingy corner of an opium den in Singapore, a gin mill in Madagascar. His gravel voice with its Brooklyn accent—undimmed by years of foreign shores and foreign tongues—echoed the foggy splash of seawater lapping against wharves.

“Think I’ll try one of them margaritas,” he said to the bartender, a shaven-headed woman of magazine-model looks, utterly unmemorable. “It’s so hot today, not that you’d know it in here, air conditioner cranked up like it was a morgue. No salt, honey.

“Looks like a morgue, too,” he chuckled. “People are so damn pale these days. I ever tell you I once worked in the city morgue? Oh yeah. That was a bad year for me. The

money I made off the Sacred Ruby of Ankhmat, I'd blown it all on a horse in the third at Belmont, and with a wife to support, I had to get a job. Yeah, I was married. Like I said, a bad year. This was, what? Forty-eight? Forty-nine? I don't remember exactly. Right after the war."

"Just how old are you, Jerky Pete?" I said.

His eyes went narrow and sly. "Oh, you don't want to know that. And I don't want to tell you. Let's just say I'm older than dirt and younger than God. And I think I'd like to know where's my margarita?"

The whisper-thin lass behind the bar heaved two oversized fishbowls into place before us. Pete's eyes lit up. "Their nachos stink," he whispered, "but they know how to serve a margarita." He smiled broadly at the bartender, showing two even rows of brilliant plastic teeth. She gave a perfunctory smile and moved off.

Huh. Bad years didn't seem so bad back then." He toasted with his margarita. "To youth, you know? Sweet youth. Golden days." He drank and smacked his wrinkled lips.

“How long were you married?”

“Oh, maybe eight or nine months. She didn’t put up with me too long. But I had to get me a job. A real job, you know, where you have to show up every day.”

I’d heard of such things.

“Not a natural life for a man. But neither is marriage. Give me a volcano or a revolution anytime, but ‘love’ . . . hell, anything you have to do day after day is work, plain and simple.” He shook his head. “The morgue was okay in the summertime, nice and cool. Funny, that’s not where I saw my first ghost. Even the dead don’t want to hang out in a morgue.”

“You’ve seen a ghost?”

“Hundreds, buddy, hundreds. All over the world. There’s been a hell of lot of dead people, you know. Stands to reason some of them’d be hanging around. I remember watching a couple hundred ghosts marching around a barrow in the Orkneys, round and round, going nowhere. Typical. Don’t see many ghosts nowadays. Whole world’s like a morgue—nobody’d want to hang out here. Anyway, come fall I decided it was time to move on. Had a nibble from a rich old guy wanting to do a safari in Kenya, kid stuff, but he chickened out

before the tickets were bought. That's when the wife pulled up stakes, ran home to mama. No hard feelings on my part. We all got our lives to live. Anyway, I get a telegram from some guy wants to outfit an expedition to Bolivia, up into the Andes north of La Paz. He's got a notion there's some lost city from before the Incas up there. Turns out he was right, but that's not the exciting part. The amazing thing that happened was . . .”

And so begins a tale.

Professor Humbert Gummy was the archaeologist's name, I kid you not. Decent guy. Paid on time and never questioned me when I was obviously right. He had a couple college kids for assistants, I don't remember their names. And a secretary, a prissy, snooty type, skinny, way too tall, wore those little pince-nez spectacles on a ribbon, I remember. Edward Evan Ruprecht the Third. I was traveling in high-toned company.

“See, the Professor'd been studying the old Spanish chronicles, and evidently this historian named Sarmiento had written about a crazy conquistador named Nuño

Jornado. This Jornado, he'd gone off on his own with a bunch of men from Pizarro's army and wandered around the mountains for a few years looking for Paititi. You know, where the Incas hid their gold after Pizarro killed Atahualpa. He didn't find it, and most of his men deserted or died off from jungle fever or attacks from the locals. Jornado got sick too, and the few men he had left abandoned him. But he didn't die. Years later, when he was an old man back in Spain, he told this Sarmiento he'd been rescued by some black men—not Indians, you see, but actual black men—and they'd carried him to this hidden city inside a mountain and nursed him back to health. The Professor thought he had a good idea of the general area this city was in and wangled money for an expedition. He wasn't interested in gold, you see, but in anthropology. He wanted to know how black men had got in the middle of the Andes before the Spanish started bringing them over as slaves." He shrugged. "It's a fair question.

"I was in charge of transport, hiring guides, and so on. I decided we should take a steamer through the Canal, then sail down the Pacific coast to Arica in Chile,

getting us there end of April, well after the rainy season. From Arica we motored pretty comfortable to Charaña, though what them South Americans don't know about building roads! We had the usual trouble at the Bolivian border, but some gringo dollars settled that, and the next day we were in La Paz.

“The Professor was champing at the bit to get on the trail, but I said we had to stay in town at least a week—had to get used to the altitude, you know, and besides, La Paz has some great nightclubs. I had an old girlfriend singing in one of them: Carmelita Aventurera. Ah, Carmelita. I’d spend the day rounding up bearers, go over maps with Gummy in the evening, head over round midnight to La Paloma and toss back a few till Carmelita finished her shift. Carmelita was a great gal, if you were easy with your money. It was from her I first got a hint of what we were going to find, when she told me about the Singing Mountain.

“Old Guarani legend,” she said. ‘They say there is a remote peak that stands alone on a barren plateau in the middle of the Andes. No man has ever climbed this mountain, for God has forbidden it. But every night, the farmers say, there comes

from this mountain strange music, like nothing ever heard in our land. Some say there is Inca gold hidden atop that mountain, watched over by the ghosts of the Emperor's bodyguard, and that it is they who sing in the dusk. Others say this music is the wind crying through the empty palace of a dead king.' Carmelita had a real dramatic streak in her.

"Well, I generally perk my ears up at old legends like that—you never know when they'll pay off some way or other. But I didn't link it up yet with this lost city the Professor was looking for.

"We were in La Paz more than two weeks, and did that prissy Edward Evan Ruprecht the Third complain! 'Oh, the food's lousy,' 'oh, there's no culture, 'oh, the bed's killing me,' nag nag nag. And Professor Gummy chewing beetles he's so antsy. But it took me that long to round up a decent guide and the men we needed. My regular guide down there, Gieronimo Zamora, he'd lost a fortune back in '29 when Coca-Cola stopped putting real coca in their sugar-water. But he'd found new markets, made another fortune, and wasn't trekking anymore. Real loss.

“Zamora recommended another guy, what was his name? Emile? Amar? I got it, Amilcare Chapi, how could I let that name slip? It’s got to be the margarita, can’t be my poor old brain. Anyway, he helped me round up the men. The local Indians were happy to get the work, most of them didn’t have two bolivianos to rub together, but every time I’d get the roster settled, somebody’s mama or uncle or sister would kick the bucket, or get married, or have a baby, and they’d disappear. People look at work different down there, more casual. Can’t say that doesn’t have its advantages. In the meantime, I got the Professor off my ass by sending him to Lake Titicaca for a couple days.

“So we finally get started. We drove to Ayata in two trucks and a jeep, then left the trucks and jeep there, hired llamas for the gear, and headed straight up and across the Cordillera Real into the Yungas. Good weather, dry, sunny, warm but not too warm. The Professor and the college kids were still feeling pretty shagged on account of the thin air, and I got to say, I was having a little trouble myself. Jobs and wives can make you soft. But Ruprecht, the secretary,” he laughed, “he seemed to come

alive at that altitude. Really surprised me for a prissy guy.

“I was born in Taos, New Mexico,’ he tells me once, like he’s doing me a favor letting me in on it. ‘Mountains are like my mother’s breast to me.’

“Yeah, well, I figure the Andes might prove a little different mama than New Mexico and he’d find out soon enough. But every day he’s up at dawn, doing his calisthenics, practically running up those mountains like a billy goat while the rest of us gringos puff and stagger like old folks.

“He started making friends with the bearers, too, joking with them in Spanish and the little bit of Guarani he’d picked up in La Paz. Funny. Didn’t really seem like his type. He even started eating his dinner with them at their fire instead of with us, and when they were singing their folk songs, he’d join in. A week or two later he started teaching them songs he knew, and I got to tell you, it was a hoot listening to them Indians singing Tin Pan Alley tunes like ‘Easter Parade’ and ‘So in Love’ and ‘You and the Night and the Music.’

“What you got in common with those guys, Ruprecht?” I ask him once. But he just

sniffs and marches off." He laughed. "I had my suspicions."

"Which were?" I prompted.

Jerky Pete winked. "You can figure it out. You're a man of the world."

He was wrong, of course. I'm a writer.

"But hey, I'm broad-minded. We trekked around those mountains for over a month, up and down, covering every damn peak for miles, and let me tell you, climbing them Andes mountains isn't any stroll through Central Park. Even Ruprecht was starting to look pretty seedy and mumbling about steak dinners in a restaurant with tablecloths. But the Professor wouldn't give up. Which is the only way anything gets done in this world. Sheer cussed stubbornness.

"It was the beginning of June, I recall, at dusk, that we went through a pass between two short peaks and came out on a plain. Nothing but scrub and rock. But there, about two miles off, standing by itself, was a mountain.

"Right then I remembered Carmelita's story, and I started to get that itchy feeling at the back of my neck that tells me something's coming together. Pay attention to your hunches, buddy, they're worth the

trouble. I gave the order to pitch camp and strolled over to the Professor.

“What’s the plan, Petalinsky?” The Professor didn’t believe in using a man’s right name.

“We’ll spend the night here, and tomorrow we’ll head over to that peak.”

“The Professor looked at me. ‘Petalinsky, I have the feeling you know a little more than you let on,’ he said.

“I smiled real nice. ‘It’s what you pay me for,’ I said. ‘Now you come on over here and I’ll tell you a little story.’

“Amilcare was ordering the bearers around, getting fires built to cook our supper. I took the Professor to a convenient rock and sat him down. Ruprecht joined us. He had about a week’s worth of whiskers on him and it didn’t improve his looks any. I told them Carmelita’s story, and while I’m talking the Professor’s eyes get wider, and he starts to get real excited.

“You see what this means, don’t you, Edward?”

“I do. When can we start the ascent?”

“Right then the wind comes up, and that’s when we all hear it. The music. Coming on the wind, it swells and fades and then swells again. We all of us stop and

look up, and our mouths fall open. I've known a lot of strange things in my life, buddy, but that music—well, it was just spooky. All the hairs on my arms and neck stood up. Amilcare and the bearers crossed themselves and moved close to each other. Some of them got down on the ground and bowed to the mountain. I noticed even the Professor had to wipe the sweat off his brow.

“It stops. We all look at each other. A while goes by. I’m just starting to breathe normal, when here it comes again.

“We stood there for a minute without moving a muscle. And the music came and went, growing and dying with the wind.

“Then the weirdest thing of all. Ruprecht, who’s been standing there with a real puzzled look on his face, starts moving in time to the music, and he starts to hum. It takes me a couple seconds to realize what he’s humming is the same as what we’re hearing from the mountain. He hums along, and then he turns to the Professor.

“Professor!” He was really worked up.
“That music!”

“Yes, Edward,” says the Professor.
“Incredible!”

“But I know it!”

“The Professor didn’t catch on. ‘You know . . .?’

“And Ruprecht sings with the music coming from the mountain, full out, like an actor on the stage, ‘*Twilight comes stealing and moonlight shines down . . .*’ and he hums, ‘. . . circle the glasses all night long.’

“Well, the Indians go nuts. They run up to him, fall down in front of him, even hug his knees. And he grins and belts out, ‘*Golden days in the sunshine of our happy youth!*’ He starts laughing, that kind of laugh makes you look at a guy real close because you know he’s right on the edge of crazy.

“Edward, what is it?” the Professor asks. It was scaring him. Hey, me too.

“Ruprecht runs to the Professor and grabs his hand. ‘We have to get up that mountain immediately!’

“Edward, what are you talking about? Calm down! What is that music?”

“Don’t you know it?” He laughs crazy again. ‘God! It makes no sense! What, or who, can be up there?’

“But what is it?”

“Ruprecht almost screams as the music swells again. We all jump. It comes through loud and clear, like an old gramophone

record. I hear drums, and a trumpet, like a march. It's enough to make your skin crawl, hearing an orchestra in the middle of the Andes. And Ruprecht sings, '*To the Inn we're marching . . .*'

"He laughs, and laughs, and laughs. 'Don't you know it?' he says. 'Dear God! Dear God! Here we are in the middle of nowhere, miles from anything like civilization, and someone up there is playing *The Student Prince!*'

Needless to say, none of us slept much that night. We stayed up listening to the music. Ruprecht sang along, forgetting the words sometimes, singing full out other times, sometimes singing the high parts like a girl, which made your skin crawl. Then around midnight the music stopped. No sound but the campfires crackling and the night birds calling. You ever been in the Andes?"

I have never been south of Bermuda, where I once attended a writers' conference.

"Night in those mountains is something to see. It's a place you learn the real meaning of infinity. Where you can see for

yourself that earth is just a speck of dust in an endless sea of stars. I'm no romantic—seen too much in my life—but a night outdoors at that altitude, with the jungle way below you and no sewer system for miles . . . now, *that's* the life for a man.

“We were up before dawn, already packed, and headed for the mountain at first light. Before the sun was full up we were at the base. Carmelita had her story straight: God forbid it, all right. There was a chasm at the foot of the mountain, fifty feet across and more, and when I threw a rock into it, you never heard a sound from it again. The bearers were scared and told us right off they wouldn't try to cross. I wasn't any too eager myself. We hiked all around the mountain, looking for a way up. We heard a roaring, and it got louder and louder, until we come where the chasm ends and there's a waterfall pouring down into it, and the river behind it is big and fast as the Colorado roaring through the Grand Canyon. Trying to ford it wouldn't be the smartest thing we ever did, but it'd sure be the last. Our side was real high above the river, sharp and jagged, like an earthquake had shoved it up. I was ready to call it quits when we found the remains of a bridge.

There were two big stone pillars and a little bit of the bridge left sticking out over the water. The pillars had pictures carved all over them. That got the Professor excited.

“These figures aren’t Incan. Nor Mayan nor Aztec.’ He grinned like a kid with a new comic book. ‘I’d even venture to say they’re not Toltec. Paper and charcoal, boys! Let’s take some rubbings!’

“Look at this!”

“The Professor looked at a figure one of the kids was pointing at. ‘Impossible! Yet there it is!’

“What is it?” I used to know a little bit about this pre-Columbian stuff.

“These carvings are not connected with any native styles I’ve studied. They almost look . . .’ He whispered. ‘They almost look African.’

“Well, I know Africa and I know African art. I ever tell you about the time I smuggled for a fancy import company? I knelt down and looked close. Sure enough, those carvings were as close to African as could be, but with a different feel to them. More flowing, more free, not so square like the African art I knew.

“All this time Ruprecht, who should probably have been helping his boss with

this really important discovery, was scouting along the riverbank, studying the cliffs. When he came back, he crossed his arms and huffed, really irritated.

“Honestly, why are we messing about with these columns when we should be trying to find a way up that mountain?”

“The Professor didn’t look up. ‘Everything in good time, Edward. I feel we are on the brink of something momentous here. Every step must be carefully documented. Aha!’ He really said ‘aha.’ ‘Look! Almost an exact replica of a Yoruban Shango figure I saw at the Museum of Natural History in New York. African god,’ he explained to me, like I didn’t already know. ‘This could be . . . this might mean . . . well, let’s just say it: this could be proof positive that Africans somehow visited South America before the Europeans! Gentlemen, we are party to a revolution in historical thought!’

“The kids looked suitably impressed, but Ruprecht huffed again. ‘There is more going on here than history, Professor! Don’t you have the slightest curiosity as to why a remote Andean mountain should play operetta music? We are not talking about

ancient civilizations and archaeological sites. There is obviously *somebody up there!*

“I think we’d all understood it, but nobody’d dared think it. Now that it was said, we all stared at each other.

“The Professor put down his magnifying glass. ‘Yes. Of course you’re right. We must get up that mountain.’

“Ruprecht rolled his eyes and stormed up on the remains of the bridge. It shook under his feet, but he didn’t pay any attention.

“We looked at the river roaring down to the waterfall. ‘Yeah. But first we have to figure out how to get over there,’ I said.

“‘Yes.’ The Professor nodded. ‘We must indeed.’

It wasn’t easy. The bridge extended from those two pillars maybe a yard over the edge of the cliff, and it was falling apart. There were matching pillars below on the opposite bank, one leaning at an angle, the other knocked clean over and lying in the brush. From where we stood, what looked like a trail led from the pillars a few yards up the mountain, but it seemed to end in scrub and a solid wall of rock. Still, it

looked like the only place we stood a chance of crossing.

“We talked over various plans. We decided to try to get a rope over the standing pillar on the far bank. If we could get two lines over it we could use them as a bridge. It’d be dangerous, but there wasn’t much choice. And that pillar was a good long way off.

“I’m a fair hand with a rope. I ever tell you about the summer I worked down on the pampas in Argentina lassoing bulls? I knew there wasn’t much hope of me throwing a plain lasso clean over that river, but I remembered a trick I picked up down there. You know how the gauchos use bolas? They can get real distance with those suckers. I spliced a couple ropes together and tied two fry pans on them at the ends as weights. Everybody got out of the way. I spun that rope like a bull-roarer around my head and let her fly.

“Went right into the river. I hauled it in and tried again. Took me ten tries to even hit the far bank, and I still couldn’t come close to the pillar.

“Ruprecht said he wanted to try, and frankly, I was tired and pissed, so I handed it over. First he swung it around his head a

little, like he was getting the feel of it. Then he did some stretches, and some calisthenics, and some squats and deep breathing. The college kids were doing their best not to laugh, but the Indians watched him like he was a priest raring up for mass. When I was about ready to kick his skinny butt in the river, he picked up the rope, sighted real careful, swung it around his head, built up some speed, and let her go.

“Bull’s-eye! Wraps it right around the standing pillar. First goddamn time! Never underestimate a guy—you don’t know what he can do till he’s going for something he really wants. And Ruprecht really wanted up that mountain. I don’t know what it was fried his bacon so. Maybe it was all the years he’d worked for Gummy—couldn’t have been the most exciting job in the world. Maybe it was fate. Maybe it was just six weeks in the mountains and finally hearing a show tune. Whatever. But he wanted it, and he got it.

“He swung another rope around that pillar, and now we had our bridge. I called for a volunteer to cross and secure the lines. Ruprecht jumped up, but he was too damn big, I needed someone light on those ropes. One of the college kids said he’d try.

We tied a line around his waist and started him off. He wasn't ten feet out before he got vertigo from the ropes' swinging and had to come back. The other college kid didn't have a head for heights, he said. Well, that's when the bottle turned towards me.

"I tie the line around my waist and climb aboard, holding on to the top line, balancing on the bottom one like a high-wire act in the circus. I ease out over the river, taking it slow and easy. There's a wind roaring through the chasm and the rope's soaked, and that didn't make things any easier. I was just past halfway, point of no return, when I get a hunch: sure enough, the bottom rope's slipping its purchase on the pillar. I look back—no chance. I look down—the hell with that! I took a breath and skittered down that rope like a ballet-dancing monkey. Not a pretty sight, but it did the job. I made the opposite shore and jumped onto solid earth again. But I stumbled and fell flat on my butt. I looked down to see what I'd landed on, and there was a skull. I'd stepped right on it. I look around and see a few scattered bones.

"I decided to worry about that later. Right now I had to get the others over. I

secured both lines, then tied the one from my waist to the pillar to make another foot-line.

“The Professor came first, holding on like death. Ruprecht came next, and didn’t shake a bit. You got to respect the guy for that. One of the college kids came over next. Wish I could remember their names.

“Every time somebody got over we untied the rope around his waist and Amilcare and the Indians’d pull it back through the water. I’d ordered Amilcare to stay put with the men, make sure they didn’t none of them run off. Most of them refused to even talk about coming over, but a few of them said they’d do it for extra pay, huh, and because Ruprecht went. They really looked up to that guy now. The first, a kid named Emilio, made it easy, but the second wasn’t even halfway across when something went wrong, he got dizzy or slipped or who knows what, and down he goes! I don’t know what happened on his end—maybe the rope was too slick from the wet—but Amilcare gave a holler and he and the Indian holding on with him fell on their faces and zip! There goes the rope! Right over the cliff! That river’s going so fast the poor guy doesn’t even get a chance to

surface before he's down the waterfall into that bottomless chasm.

"Emilio screamed like a little girl on seeing his pal go under, and Ruprecht put his arm around the guy's shoulders. The Professor looked away, shook up. The college kid just stared with his mouth open, went white, and passed out. We were all thinking how that could've been us. And you can bet we were all thinking about how we had to make the return trip, too.

"That was the end of any more Indians trying to cross. We couldn't talk to the other party, the river was too fast and loud. But we could see the Indians were moaning and screaming, and it was all Amilcare could do to keep them from vamoosing there and then. The other college kid didn't show any signs of wanting to join us on our little outing after that, either. We were on our own.

"Well, nothing to do but move on. I took charge and got us going. We walked up the path, and sure enough, like I figured, it ended at a wall of rock and scrub. I didn't see much point trying to climb that, so I split us up into two parties and sent us opposite directions around the base of the mountain to see if there was any easier

way, with orders to meet back by the broken bridge in two hours.

“I went west with the college kid and Emilio. The Professor and Ruprecht went east. Before we got too far the level ground we were on gave way where the chasm chopped into the side of the mountain. Not even a ledge. Couldn’t go another step without major tackle. We went back and waited by the pillars to hear what Gummy and Ruprecht came up with.

“While we’re waiting, Emilio starts pacing around. He’s kicking around some rocks when he all of a sudden gives a whoop and jumps back.

“The wall fell apart, rocks come a-tumbling down, and what do you think? A cave! And the floor of this cave goes *up*, and it’s worn low and smooth. People been walking up through this cave a long time. We couldn’t see too far inside, there was a jog about thirty feet in that hid where the cave led. I couldn’t hardly wait for the Professor and Ruprecht to get back before I ran up there myself. I set Emilio and the college kid to clearing the debris out of the mouth of the cave. I checked the flashlights and made sure everything was in order.

“Soon enough here comes the Professor and Ruprecht. They ran into the same problem we did, the mountain just gave way to a sheer drop. I show them the cave and Ruprecht gets all worked up, wants to start up right off. But the Professor didn’t do anything in a toot. He went to the mouth of the cave and gave it a long study. ‘Petalinsky,’ he says, ‘you notice anything odd about this cave?’

“Now that he mentioned it, I did. ‘Looks a little regular, don’t it?’

“Almost a perfect semi-circle.’ He went close and studied the walls. ‘Look at this. Amazing!’

“I ran a hand over the stone. It was even—too even—and there were regular lines. ‘This wall is man-made of dressed stone.’

“The Professor nodded like a wind-up toy. ‘This is no cave. This is a tunnel, built by human hands.’

“Giant stone blocks, tons apiece, cut up in angles and set together like a jigsaw puzzle. You couldn’t slip a penknife blade between the blocks, they fit together so pretty. Solid, too, though there wasn’t any mortar as I could see.

“‘Dry-stone technique,’ the Professor said. ‘Like the palace at Cuzco. The lost city

of Great Zimbabwe is built in the same manner, but not so finely. These stones haven't a hair's-breadth gap between them.'

"But then I kind of lost track of his argument, because I heard something up in the tunnel. Something like rocks falling. I hollered for everybody to get back, thinking there was another rockslide coming at us. Then the noise stopped. We all went close again, because now we could hear something else. Something like footsteps.

"We stepped out of the tunnel. We must've looked like a flock of chickens seeing the shadow of a hawk, standing there with our mouths hanging open. The footsteps come closer, and closer, and we huddle tighter together. A light's flickering on the stone wall up inside the tunnel. I don't know about the others, but I was about ready to disgrace myself.

"Then the light got bright and suddenly there they were, coming down the tunnel. Three men. Real tall, and black. Pure African by the looks of them. They were dressed in red wool trousers and caftans covered with embroidery, but the embroidery wasn't the kind the Indians did.

Good-looking guys. The Professor was shaking, he was so excited. There they were, Africans in South America, all right. I bet they looked to him like three Nobel prizes standing there.

“The one in the middle was holding a lamp like Aladdin’s lamp. They stopped in a row and took a good long look at us. The one with the lamp pointed at the pillars, at the ropes, and said something. The one to his left pointed at the rubble and said something. All three jabbered for a minute to each other. Then they shut up and looked at us again.

“Standoff. I held up my hand and said something in Spanish. No reaction. I tried Guarani. Still no reaction. I tried Aymaran. No go.

“The black guy with the lamp bowed like a European. Then he said, in perfect English, ‘Our greetings sincere, sincere. Welcome to our humble dwelling. We’ll make you comfortable as best we can.’

“The man on his left said, ‘With astonishment my eyes are swelling. He looks just the same as a man!’

“They grinned and laughed out loud.

“The Professor whooped, the college kid looked ready to pass out again. You got to

admit, this was weird as hell. Here we find a bunch of Africans in the middle of the Andes, probably hidden there for a thousand years, and they come out speaking English poetry—not good poetry, but it rhymed.

“One of them said, ‘Happily have we found you! Graciously give the prize!’

“And another one said, ‘All of us seek your favor, quick, ere the music dies!’

“Ruprecht didn’t seem too surprised. He stepped right up and he sang at them. That’s right, sang at them.

“*In Heidelberg fair*

“*You’ll breathe sweeter air.*’

“You’d have thought he’d just promised them Fort Knox. The three black men threw their hands in the air and hollered in their own language, ran up to Ruprecht and touched him all over, like he was something they couldn’t believe. Ruprecht just grinned. And they sang right back to him.

“Ruprecht turned to us. ‘I’ll bet they can sing in Latin, too!’ He sings, ‘*Gaudeamus igitur . . .*’

“And the three guys sing, *in harmony!*

“*Juvenes dum sumus.*’

“That’s when the Professor fainted. We’ve all got our limits.

The middle guy pointed at the Professor and said, ‘Father Jacob lay a-snoring in his feather bed.’

“Another one nodded and said, ‘Oh, my poor lad, you don’t know what the world’s like, but I’ll show you.’

“I was getting real nervous now. Looks like not only did we find a bunch of Africans living in the Andes where they weren’t supposed to, but they were all jackass crazy.

“The three black guys waited polite while we got the Professor back on his feet. Ruprecht said to us, ‘I don’t think they actually speak English. They’re repeating lines from *The Student Prince*. Here, my good fellows, do you understand what we’re saying?’

“The one who acted like the leader said, ‘Friends, good faithful friends. Come, we’ll make a night of it, we’ll go to the castle on Neckar rock.’ And he gestured for us to follow them into the cave. ‘Come, we’ll make a night of it!’ he urged.

“You see?” Ruprecht said. ‘All lines from the show. But they fit the situation.’

“If you say so,’ I shrugged. ‘Anyhow, they want us to come with them and I don’t see why not. You okay, Professor?’

“I’m quite myself again.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m really quite embarrassed at having fainted.’

“The three black guys said, ‘Here’s your health in return!’

“Been a rough day for all of us,’ I said, ‘and it don’t look like it’s over yet. Okay, boys! Come on, take us to your leader!’

“The three black men grinned like I’d given them a song cue, which I guess I had, because they slapped each other on the shoulders and started singing again. Ruprecht joined in, and we marched into the cave like a bunch of sweaty, gobsmacked chorus boys.

The tunnel went up at an easy angle. Around the jog it widened out to about thirty feet, and every few yards was a niche carved into the rock wall with a figure placed in it, like a religious statue. Typical African style, except again, the edges were rounder and the figures decorated more fancy. The Professor was dying to get his

hands on those babies, but our friends marched us along double-time. He oohed and ahhed and kept calling to Ruprecht to take notes of this or that, but Ruprecht was making it a quartet and not paying any attention. He had a pretty good tenor, at that.

“Everything was covered in dust. The floor of the tunnel was thick with dust, with just three sets of footprints, obviously from our three black friends coming down to meet us, so I figured that tunnel hadn’t been used in a good long time. I wanted to ask how come, but the men were having such a good time I decided to skip it.

“We got to a spot where there’d been a rockslide and most of the tunnel was filled with rubble, but you could just cross it without banging your head on the ceiling. Past that was a steeper place where steps were cut into the wall, so the glee club had to stop singing while we puffed our way up. At one point there was a crack in the walls and the steps took off at a crazy angle for about thirty feet, not real fun climbing with a full pack. Then they went back to normal. ‘Looks to me like an earthquake hit this mountain a long time ago,’ I said.

“‘Yes,’ said the Professor. ‘If only we can find out how long ago!’

“We stopped talking. We needed all our breath to climb those steps. After about half an hour, when my knees were screaming for mercy, we come to a fairly level passage and see light ahead. The black men turned back to us, waving and bowing. ‘Your highness most gracious and kind and good, come.’ We caught up and there it was.

“We were at the mouth of a tunnel high up on the inner slope of a natural amphitheater, like a crater, inside the mountain. Up above us the mountain walls were white with glacial ice. From the glaciers three waterfalls fell. They collected in pools that emptied into ditches, and these ditches ran down and around to irrigate a series of terraces, just like the Incas used to build. There were people working on the terraces, black people, hoeing, planting, loading up llamas and leading them around. Below the terraces, at the bottom of this amphitheater, was a village made up of round, beehive-style buildings, just like in an African kraal, but built more solid out of rock. There were more people wandering around among the buildings. In the center of the village we see

a big open space, and—here's the goofy part, like this whole thing wasn't goofy enough to begin with—in the open space, the village green, you might say, there's a stage! A real stage, just like in a theater, with a proscenium and wings and a red curtain hanging in it.

“We were all floored by that, let me tell you. ‘Unbelievable!’ Ruprecht panted. ‘I’m starting to understand just what this is all about.’

“Well, I wish to hell you’d let me in on it,’ I said. ‘This set-up has me stymied but good.’

“Very well.’ He looked real smug, which is a sure way to get my goat. ‘I won’t say what my suspicions are, but I’ll make you a wager.’

“Any man says that, he’s got a sucker bet in his head. And I’m no sucker.’

“He smiled. ‘Then I’ll make a prediction. I predict we’ll find white men like ourselves down there, and they’ll all be as American as you or I!’

“Our guides were already halfway down the path to the village, waving and hollering at us, wanting us to follow them. ‘Yes, yes, it’s getting late!’ they hollered. I grunted at Ruprecht and said, ‘Whoever the

hell's down there, white, black, or purple plaid, I hope they got a square meal ready for us.' Ruprecht laughed and clapped me on the shoulder.

"So we follow the three singing cavaliers. Every terrace we pass through, we collect another two or three natives. By the time we get down to the village we're a regular parade. And they're *all* singing by now, with Ruprecht beating time like Toscanini. Gave me the willies, but by this time a pink dinosaur could've tap-danced down a rainbow singing Gilbert and Sullivan and I wouldn't've been surprised.

"We get to the village, and there's at least six or seven hundred people waiting for us. Good turnout. The three guys who brought us grinned big like they'd made us themselves, but nobody else is saying a word. That's a spooky sight: six or seven hundred people staring at you and not making a sound.

"Suddenly the crowd starts shifting, they open up a path to us, and here comes an old woman, hair white as snow and combed straight back, dressed in a bright red robe like a muumuu, covered all over with embroidered birds and animals and flowers. She had spiral designs tattooed on both

cheeks in yellow. Behind her came two more women dressed in embroidered robes of different colors, with the same tattoos on their cheeks. A few old men followed them at a respectful distance. One of these men also had the spiral tattoos on his cheeks.

“The old woman looked us up and down with her eyebrows raised. Then she said something in her own language to us. Our guides started jabbering at her, but she silenced them with a wave of her hand. The guy with the lamp said something else, and she nodded. She came up to me and held out her hand.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. Allow me to welcome you to our home.’

“We all looked at each other. Then we looked at Ruprecht. He shrugged and said, ‘I don’t think that’s from the show.’

““You speak English?’ I asked. ‘Real English?’

“She smiled at me. ‘I do. And may I say, I am happy to have opportunity to practice it upon fresh ears. Our old friends have become so used to our natural tongue that they almost never use their own, except in performance.’

“In performance!” Ruprecht crowed. ‘Then you do, in fact, perform *The Student Prince*?’

“I myself am not an actress,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have the talent for it. I am only a mother of our community. However, I have had the honor of reciting the role of the Grand Duchess Anastasia upon occasion, when our dear Miss Matilda has been indisposed.’

“All this was going over my head. ‘Excuse me,’ I said—I’ve always been polite, it’s a requirement when you deal with headhunters and cannibals and such—‘but I don’t get it.’

“She looked at me just a little puzzled. ‘Have we given you anything yet? We have been remiss.’ She said something in her own lingo to the guys with us, and they ran off through the crowd. ‘Masalito and Detlef will run ahead to see that food and drink is prepared for you. Needless to say, when we sent them to investigate the noise within the Mother, we had little suspicion they would discover guests.’

“I figured when she said ‘Mother’ she meant the earth. That’s pretty standard wherever you go.

“She said, ‘But I forget my manners. I am Sankarana Dobo. These ladies are also council-mothers of the people. May I present Madiba Koné, Sunu Sako, and Kathie Sako.’

“They made us curtseys, so we bowed to them, too. Seemed like the thing to do. I made the introductions on our side. Once that was out of the way, Sankarana said, ‘Come, please. We shall go to the dzimba woye to take our meal.’ She turned and led us through the crowd towards the largest round house, on the east side of the village green. Finally, about this time the Professor got over his shock and started asking questions.

“‘You mentioned a noise in the Mother?’ the Professor said.

“‘Yes, we heard a roaring and rumbling from the old tunnel. The farmers were rather frightened. I must admit, we are all afeared of another quaking of the earth, though most are not old enough to remember when the Mother screamed, as are I and Sunu Sako. We sent the young men to explore the cause. Do you know why the Mother spoke so just now?’

“‘That was Emilio,’ I said. Emilio was standing blank-faced next to the college

kid. He'd been looking pretty dazed since we got there. We were all talking English and he only knew Guarani and Spanish, so he was kind of left out. 'We were down at the river, at that old bridge, and he started a landslide that opened up the tunnel.'

"Sankarana stopped. 'Then the tunnel is open again. But however did you come across the water? Surely the bridge is not still standing?'

"No, there's not much left of that. But we managed to throw a couple ropes across and got over that way.'

"The bridge!' The Professor'd started getting excited again. 'What do you know of that bridge?'

"I know all that is to be known of that bridge, though what has happened since the Mother moved when I was a maiden I cannot say, for my people have not been outside our home here since then.'

"The bridge is gone.'

"Yes, I should imagine so. The movement of the Mother was dreadful and fierce, and when it came it shut up the tunnel, which was our only means of leaving here. As you can see,' she pointed up to the ice on the mountaintop, 'to climb above the roof of the world is impossible,

for it is covered in ice and no one may walk safely there, but all are swallowed up in the belly of the ice.'

"The glaciers must be unstable,' the Professor said.

"Our ancestors built the tunnel for this purpose, to allow us to go into the broader world, but also to protect us from those who should not come here, for a mere handful of warriors may easily ward off any who attempt to enter the tunnel. However, when the Mother quaked beneath us she raised up our valley and lifted it far from all intruders, and to prove that we need not seek happiness elsewhere, she closed up the tunnel with stones. Not long after this one of our villagers attempted to cross the roof of the world, but he did not return, and since that time we have remained content here, as we should.'

"I thought of that skull by the bridge. Guess the poor guy made it over the glaciers after all.

"Now we have no warriors, for there is no need for them. Though if the tunnel is now again open . . ."

"The old women looked at each other and Kathie Sako and Madiba Koné started talking in their own language. But

Sankarana held up her hand. 'Ladies, please. We must not discuss business before our guests. This is something we shall speak upon later.'

"You don't have much to worry about from outsiders," Ruprecht said. 'The river's almost impassible. We lost one man in it this morning. And there's a deep chasm all around your mountain.'

The women looked at each other again and nodded. Sankarana said, 'I can see you bring us much news of interest. But please, come into the dzimba. We will eat and drink and make you comfortable.'

"She led us into the big building. There were another bunch of folks in there, standing around our three friends from the tunnel, who were talking and shouting and telling a good yarn about us. They shut up when we came in. Everybody turned and stared.

"Sankarana spoke to them a minute. Then they bowed to us and went about their business.

"Please, sit down," she said to us. She led us to a row of pillows, and we all took a load off. The college kid was still in a daze, and Emilio didn't know what the hell was going on. I'd have filled him in in Spanish,

but I was kind of preoccupied myself. The Professor started to ask about the bridge again, and the village, and a half a million other things. But Sankarana hushed him and said, ‘Please, we shall talk after you have refreshed yourselves.’ She gave some more orders and people put straw mats in front of us. Three boys brought us bowls of hot porridge, and four girls brought in baskets of fruit and bread. The porridge was a little sour, but I was so hungry I didn’t care. The bread was fluffy and tasted pretty good, especially smeared with llama cheese. To drink they gave us cups of water, ice-cold from the waterfalls, and hot bowls of some sort of tea. All in all, not a bad spread on short notice.

“So we ate. The Professor tried a dozen times to start in with the questions, but Sankarana always cut him off—polite, but she meant business. I noticed that when they served the food, everything was done in a certain way, in a certain order, everything just so, like ritual.

“When we were done, Madiba Koné said something to a girl at her side, and the girl ran out of the building. Sankarana turned to the Professor. ‘And now, sir, if you are

curious about anything here, I will be happy to speak with you.'

"The Professor almost jumped out of his skin at the opportunity. You could see him fighting with himself, trying to figure out what to ask first. Finally he settled on picking up where he'd left off before the main course. 'You said you knew about the bridge, madam. Can you tell me who built it?'

"Certainly I can. The bridge was raised by our fathers and mothers who first came to this land, to lead from the outside world to our home here. At that time we were in communication with other peoples and traded with them on occasion.'

"But where did your people come from?"

"Oh, that is a story we tell for our worship. It was a distant country over the water—not the small river water below the mountain, but a great water. I must say, I had never believed too deeply in these stories our mothers told of our original homeland, for this home has always seemed perfection to me. But our friends the players have confirmed that indeed the great water exists, and I am happy to find my people's worship vindicated.'

““You see?” the Professor said to Ruprecht and the college kid. ‘Africa!’

“Sankarana smiled. ‘Dear John Marcus always spoke of this Africa you have named, and said our people came from there. I myself cannot say. Our mothers called that far land Luba.’

“But when did they come here?” the Professor said.

“Ruprecht butted in. ‘Who is John Marcus?’

“Sankarana raised a finger, like she was disappointed they didn’t speak in turn. ‘To answer your question first, Mr. Professor. Our people came here long ago, years beyond counting. When they came, this land held another people, like him,’ and she pointed at Emilio, who was almost pure Indian. ‘But shorter, I am told. We taught them to farm, we tamed and bred for them the tuyos, we tried to be their friends. But they were a warlike people, and our mothers and fathers eventually retreated here, into the Breast of the Mother, and built the tunnel and the bridge to protect us.

“And now your question, Mr. Edward. John Marcus was one of our players. Unfortunately he returned to the Mother

some years ago. He was a wise man, and told me much of your world beyond the Mother. It was he who taught me your true tongue, and not simply the sound of the play.'

“The play! The play!” Ruprecht said.

“Edward, really,” the Professor said.

“You will learn of the play, Mr. Edward. It is the great story of love, loss, and acceptance. Tonight you will be privileged to see the play yourselves, and in the meantime, I have sent for our players to meet you, and here they have come to us. They will be most happy to speak with you, I am sure.”

“Right then, through the door come white folks. Maybe thirty people as white as you and me. They all looked to be in their fifties and sixties, some even older. They stopped short, seeing us, and nobody said anything. Then one of the men stepped forward. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. One of the women moved up beside him and touched his arm. He swallowed and started again. He sounded like he was about to cry.

“Gentlemen,” he said. ‘Welcome! I am told you speak English. Is this true?’

“Nobody answered, so I piped up with, ‘Good as you, pal.’ I’ve always been good in tense situations. I went to him with my hand out, friendly, you know? He looked at it like he didn’t know what to do with it, then he grinned and shook it. ‘Name’s Pete, Jerky Pete. Nice to meet you. I hope you can fill us in on just what the hell is going on around here.’

“He kept shaking my hand. ‘Good heavens, it’s been so long since we’ve seen a stranger, and heard good American talk! Please forgive me.’ He let go of my hand. ‘I’m—I’m quite overcome.’

He reached out like he was dizzy. The older woman next to him got a grip on his arm. ‘Steady, dear. It was bound to happen someday.’

“I must be honest, I never believed it. I’m all right, darling.’ He clapped his hands together heartily. ‘Well, gentlemen, I believe introductions must be in order! Jerky Pete, I am Herbert Monckton, tenor primo. Goodness, it sounds odd, using the old name! Everyone here calls me Karl Franz. This is my wife, Helen Nielsen, better known as Princess Margaret. Fritzi, dear, come here. This is Fritzi Dickson-Carr, leading soprano, our Kathie.’ And he went

down the line, introducing each and every one of them. 'Brian Stuart, oboe. Leslie Rubens, first violin. Lutz—I'm sorry, Harry Smith, our comedian.'

"Ruprecht waited patient till he'd finished. Then he said, 'But God, man! How long have you all been here?'

"Monckton blinked. 'It's so hard to remember.' He looked at his wife. 'Dearest, how long has it been?'

"I'm sure I couldn't say.' She had a high, bubbly, shaky voice. 'What year is it, sir?'

"I told them. They looked amused and pretty surprised.

"1949? 1949?" Monckton took his lady's hand. 'Well, we started the tour in '26, didn't we, dearest? So then, it's only been twenty-three years? Only twenty-three years, after all?'

It took a while, but we got the whole story out of them eventually. They were a touring company and the booking agent had made a mistake and sent them to Mexico City. 'Business was not excellent in Mexico City,' Kathie, the soprano, said, 'and the Schuberts so hated to use red ink

that the agent, a dreadful little man, no spine in him, booked us on to Panama City to try to make up the loss. Business was just as bad there, and we went on to Bogotá. We had no real choice. We were under contract for the entire year, and it was, after all, a paying engagement.'

"Monckton said, 'Actually, I was rather proud to be part of the first Schubert company to go beyond the States!'

"Well, the agent left us in Bogotá and went on ahead to secure a booking in Lima. We followed in the trucks and busses, all forty-seven of us, with the sets and costumes. What a horrible trip!'

"Monckton nodded. 'Everything went wrong from the beginning. We got lost immediately, the trucks broke down continually, we were once surrounded by an Indian war party—I think they were Arawakans who had somehow wandered up into the mountains from the Amazon. They didn't hurt us, but we had to bribe them with a fair amount of our provisions, which were precious few to begin with. Then the earthquake happened and destroyed our road.'

“‘We were absolutely helpless,’ Helen Nielsen said. ‘But Herbert suggested we try to go around the damaged road.’

“Monckton sipped at some tea. ‘That was almost the end of us. Another earthquake struck and one of the trucks was lost, with our assistant stage manager, our second-act set, and a number of props. We made it as far as this mountain when the bus broke down completely. I don’t mind saying, at that point we were all feeling rather hopeless, weren’t we, dear? But God watches over drunks—’

“‘And actors!’ Helen put in on cue.

“They all laughed. Big joke.

“Yes, indeed. We had broken down not far from a large stone bridge. I crossed it and found the tunnel. I was leery of entering, but before we could discuss it these good people came out and welcomed us so graciously that we felt quite at ease. They unloaded our trucks and busses and carried absolutely everything here. Well, naturally, to thank them we put up a rather rough performance, which I am gratified to report met with an unqualified rave. Unfortunately, that very night we suffered another earthquake, which demolished the tunnel and made our exit impossible.’

“A real old woman, Matilda Johnston, spoke up. ‘We were, of course, most upset. I was especially afraid that these people might somehow blame our performance for the earthquake, for I have to say, when I first saw them I thought them perfect savages. But they are really marvelously civilized and they never blamed us at all. As old Mother Kalana said to me, “We have known of the Mother’s shaking for many generations, Miss Matilda, and how could we ever attach it to artists?” Really very kind of her. She was a grand lady. She passed on in our . . . our fifth season, wasn’t it?’

“They all nodded.

“And then Sankarana became Mother. A very wise woman of exquisite taste.’

“Is it always the women who rule the village?’ the Professor asked.

“Helen Nielsen frowned. ‘Rule’s not the right word, is it?’ She was making tea while she talked. ‘Everything here is done with such cooperation and real pleasure in the doing. But the elder women do form the core of the council, yes.’

“At any rate,’ Monckton continued, ‘the people so loved our show that we continued to perform it nightly that

summer. After the first year they built us a real stage, to our stage manager's instructions, and a lovely job they did, too. It's become almost a religious ritual for them, wouldn't you say, love? And for us, of course. Oh, thank you.'

"Helen handed him a cup of tea.

"Who's this John Marcus that Sankarana mentioned?" That Ruprecht was a dog who never let go of a bone.

"Kathie sighed and shook her head. 'Dear John. He was our Doctor.'

"You traveled with a doctor?" the college kid said.

"No, no, our Dr. Engel, in the play. He's passed on, too. A great man, and a good actor. Though his voice failed him in his last years. But we are all suffering the ravages of time.' She laughed.

"Not you. Our Kathie is immortal," Monckton said.

"I asked Monckton how old he was.

"He counted up on his fingers. 'Well, let's see. If this is 1949, and I was forty-two when I joined the company—'

"Darling!" Helen said. 'You told me you were thirty-five!'

"Did I? Well, the vanity of the actor. I didn't *look* forty-two, now, did I?"

“You didn’t look thirty-five. He was really almost as dashing then as he is now.’

“Flattery! But of course I lied about my age. The Schuberts would scarcely have hired a forty-two-year-old student prince, would they?’

“You were perfect, whatever your age, Karl Franz.’ Helen patted his shoulder. ‘You still are. He’s simply the best prince ever, much better than Howard Marsh on Broadway.’

“Now, now, Marsh was a fine singer, a really fine singer.’

“But his acting! And you’re much handsomer.’

“He grinned like a kid at that. ‘And you are the loveliest Margaret. The pathos she brings to the role!’

“I’m only on stage in the third act, and I only have one song,’ she told us. ‘Little did I know it would turn into the role of a lifetime!’

“They had a good laugh over that one.

“Ruprecht said, ‘But who plays the Doctor now?’

“Monckton looked at Kathie and smiled very sly. ‘Ah. Well, that’s actually very interesting.’ But he wouldn’t tell us why.

Meanwhile, the Professor was quizzing Sankarana and the other women and anybody else he could get to stand still two minutes. ‘Absolutely astounding!’ he kept saying. ‘If what Sankarana says is true — if in fact it is this people who brought the ideas of building terraces, farming, breeding llamas — dear God, we could be looking at the remains of a civilization older than Sumer! But however did they get here? The notion of a ship seems utterly unknown.’

“Well, they’ve been stuck in this mountain long enough to forget what a boat looks like.’

“Yes, but they don’t even have a word for it. I explained the concept and drew a picture, but Sunu Sako was at a loss.’ He looked happy. ‘There are years of research to be done—decades!’

“Ruprecht said to him, ‘So you’re still planning to set up a research camp here?’

“Of course, of course! Imperative! Edward, our fortunes are made, my boy! This is without doubt the greatest discovery since Schliemann found Troy!’

“Ruprecht looked disgusted at that, and walked off. Probably back to the actors. He seemed to really fit in there.

Sankarana called us back into the main building—what she called the dzimba woye — for our supper. More porridge, a sort of vegetable stew, that good fluffy bread, and a sweet, syrupy drink to go with it. The actors didn't eat with us. 'They do not break their fast till after the performance,' Sankarana said. 'Miss Matilda tells us that eating before a performance is bad for the digestion. But I believe they simply like an excuse to eat late in the night.' Sankarana was pretty savvy.

"During the meal the Professor was fuming, because no questions were allowed. Monckton had told us to be careful in our etiquette, which was the most important thing in the village. 'I suppose that living in such close quarters, and being so isolated,' he said, 'their etiquette has become, of necessity, the means of preserving perfect peace. In all our years here, I personally have witnessed only a very few of the mildest quarrels.'

"'Yes,' Helen said, 'they are remarkably equitable. We've grown a bit like them after all this time, haven't we?'

"'Oh, God, yes!' Kathie had a big, deep laugh for a soprano. 'We were your typical

passel of actors, at each other's throats day and night! And the orchestra was even worse. I remember you had a particular dislike of me, Karl Franz.'

"Monckton looked worried. 'A boyish idiocy, the usual tenor-soprano rivalry, I assure you. It is my greatest pleasure to have played opposite you all these years.'

"And it didn't help matters, your falling for Margaret. I was used to having my leading man wrapped around my finger.'

"And yet, now we're all one happy family,' Helen said. 'Really happy. and you know, I don't believe it's just the people, though they're wonderful.'

"No,' Monckton smiled.

"I believe the play has something to do with it. *The Student Prince*. Every night we sing this lovely music and tell this beautiful story of falling in love and growing up. It's made everything so much easier for us all. When we realized we probably weren't ever going to get back home — well, I for one went through a very bad time.'

"Some of the others mumbled agreement.

"And then when John died . . . you don't know, you can't know what that meant for us. But every night we went on,

and every night we go on, and we learn again what life is all about.'

"When the meal was done, Sankarana led us out of the dzimba woye to the green. We got great seats, right behind the mothers, who sat dead center in front of the orchestra. The musicians, there were maybe eighteen of them, came in and sat down. They were wearing the remains of tuxedos, one with a tux jacket on over a pair of the usual red trousers, one with a dickie and bow tie over his caftan. Some of the original musicians had died, so there was a black bassoon player and violist and drummer. Their music stands had little oil lamps fastened on the tops. The conductor, a guy named Mickey Novograd, came out and bowed to us. We applauded, but the locals sat quiet, so we shut up real fast. Novograd raised his baton and the show started.

"Four big chords, dum-dum-dum-dum doo-bee-dum. Four guys dressed up like palace servants marched out in front of the curtain. The curtain was the original red velvet, and probably was old in 1927. Now it was a threadbare rag you could almost see through. It was patched with coarse-woven llama wool, but it was still bright

red, fresh dyed every summer for the new season.

“The four servant guys started singing. I don’t remember all of it. It was pretty funny, they were jazzing the rich guys they worked for. I looked around then at the audience, and they were all swaying in their seats to the music, eyes glued to the stage, humming along. Even the little kids were humming along. And Ruprecht was humming along, too.

“The servant guys finished their number and the curtain opened. The first scene was a room in the palace, you know, all gold and fancy chairs and stuff. The set was really cheesy, but not much cheesier than some of the shows I’ve seen on Broadway. The colors were funny, blotchy where they’d mixed native pigments to fix up the faded spots.

“On comes Monckton, dressed up like a prince, but the jacket wasn’t fitting too good anymore over his belly. He starts talking, like there’s somebody there with him. But there’s no one there at all. I realized this is a scene with the dead guy, Dr. Engel. I wondered what was going to happen, and Ruprecht looked real confused.

“Monckton finished his speech, and just stood there. And then the wildest thing of all happened, the wildest thing out of all the wild things I’d seen on this expedition. The whole audience, every single man, woman, and kid in the place, sat up and answered him in unison! It took me a minute to catch on to what they were doing. They were playing the part of the dead guy, the Dr. Engel in the show.

“Buddy, it gave me the shivers. There they are, saying the line, ‘Go, and God bless you.’ And the orchestra sneaks in, little wispy music, while Monckton says, ‘Why, Doctor, have you forgotten all the plans we made, ever since I was a little chap, to go away together someday, to Heidelberg! How you told me of the River Neckar, and of the students’ work. How they sing in the evening!’

“The music gets louder, and the audience said, ‘Oh! How they can sing!’ And then, god damn it, they start singing!

“*Down where the Neckar
flows swiftly along
“Nestles a town that is
famous in song.*”

“And Monckton joins in,

“*Twilight comes stealing
and moonlight shines down.*”

“And it goes on, dialogue and singing, the audience filling in wherever Dr. Engel has a line, and Monckton walking around as if he’s standing there with somebody.

“*Golden days in the sunshine
of our happy youth,*

“*Golden days, full of innocence
and full of truth.*”

“You know the story of that show? Pure schmaltz, buddy, guaranteed to make you cry. This prince goes off to college and falls in love with a woman in a bar, and they all drink a lot of beer, and they pledge eternal love, blah blah blah. Then his grandpa gets sick and dies, and he has to go back and be king and marry somebody else. And at the end he sees the bar girl again, and they sing the big song again, you know the one. ‘*Deep in my heart, dear,*’ that one. They sing it about a dozen times in the show. Never heard it, huh?”

I am not a fan of musicals.

“Yeah, me neither. But I got to say, when it works, it works. Especially that night, up in the Andes, with a bunch of lost Africans around us, with that blank spot on stage where the old doctor used to be, and the audience saying his lines, and all those old farts acting like kids in school and belting out those songs just as good as ever. That Kathie, she had a great voice, buddy. When she sang that song, *‘Come, boys, let’s all be gay, boys!’* it really made you want to get up and march! And Helen was pretty good too, singing to the guy she wanted to marry but couldn’t, because she had to marry this prince who was in love with somebody else, too. They knew how to write shows back then, not like the crap nowadays, all serious and important and no fun at all. Real songs, real voices, real romance, that’s what you used to get at a show. There’s a lot to be said for romance, buddy, though I don’t subscribe to it myself. Hell, most people’d think my life’s been romantic, but being the one who lived it, I know romance didn’t have much to do with it.”

“And what happened?” I asked. “When you left? Did you make the news? I’ve never heard of this lost city.”

“Oh, that’s pretty interesting. We stayed in that village a couple weeks. The Professor was studying everything, the college kid was taking pictures and making charts, and Ruprecht was hanging out with the actors. We were all settling in real cozy and friendly. I went back down the tunnel once, down all those steps, with Masalito, to show Amilcare we were okay and he should stay put till we got back. But the funny thing was, nobody was really thinking about going back.

“It started with Emilio. He’d hooked up with some of the local boys and was working on the terraces. I talked to him about getting the equipment ready to head home, but he stopped me quick.

“No, Mr. Pete, no! I cannot go back, oh no, I could not go back! You Americans do not understand what is here! This, Mr. Pete, oh! This is the Land-Without-Evil!”

“Now, I’d heard a little bit about that during my time in Peru, when I found the burial chamber of the emperor. It’s an old Guaraní story, but I wasn’t sure exactly how it went. ‘What do you mean, this is the Land-Without-Evil? Sure, these folks seem pretty decent, but—’

“‘No, no, oh!’ I never saw him so worked up. ‘You Americans! The Land-Without-Evil is the place, oh, Mr. Pete, the place the Guarani have searched for since long before you people came. A wise man told long ago of a place where all was beautiful, where food was plentiful, where there was no trouble, where God himself raised the stones and planted the crops. The Guarani have always searched for this place, and that is why we are found in all places. Even when the Spanish and the Jesuits chained us and beat us and killed us to keep us with them, we searched. My own great-grandfather, he left my great-grandmother and her son, my grandfather, and went with twenty men from the village to search for the Land-Without-Evil. They never returned. And of all my people, I, I have found it!’ He was almost dancing. ‘Oh, Mr. Pete!’ And he started bawling like a baby.

“Well, what do you say to that? How did I know he wasn’t right? He ran off again with some of his new buddies and left me standing there, and he didn’t hang out with our group any more.

“The actors didn’t show any great inclination to go back to civilization either. ‘What would we do there?’ Matilda said.

‘There’s nothing sadder than an old, out-of-work actor. We have nothing — no money, no homes. I’m sure our families and friends have forgotten us, if they’re even still alive.’

“I don’t think I could bear living in a city again,’ Helen said. ‘All those people, all those buildings. And automobiles! They smell so.’

“Well, you can’t argue with that.

“Our homes are here,’ Kathie said. ‘Our lives are here, and our work. We all have husbands, wives, children, grandchildren. The people love us. And we love them. No, I don’t think we could go back, do you?’

“Monckton shook his head. ‘To what? You’re right, our lives are here.’

“I said, ‘That’s okay by me. But you know, things aren’t going to stay like this much longer.’ They looked up at that. ‘Once the Professor gets back to La Paz he’ll wire his college and every news service. He’s going to be famous, and that means you’re going to be famous. Pretty soon this place’ll be crawling with scientists.’

“They all looked at each other then. Nobody said anything.

“Next day I was sitting with the Professor, trying to get him to set a date for our heading back, when a girl came in

asking us to come to the mothers in the dzimba woye. We went right off, of course. When we got there, the whole council, all the mothers and fathers of the village, and all the actors, were sitting together waiting for us.

“Sankarana smiled and offered us pillows to sit. ‘Thank you for coming, Mr. Professor, and Mr. Jerky. There is something we must discuss with you.’

“I knew right away what it was about. ‘Mr. Professor, we understand that you have been very happy to come into the Breast of the Mother and be with us this time. We have watched you learning about our home and our ways. We are happy you are glad to know us so well.’

“The Professor nodded.

“We have known that you will go sometime soon back to your own people, and we would know now what you intend to tell them of us.’

“The Professor took a minute to put his thoughts together. ‘Mother Sankarana, I will tell them all that I have learned here. My people will also be very happy to know of you.’

“We are happy to make others happy,’ Madiba Koné said. ‘And yet we also wish to

remain happy ourselves. Our first duty to our people is to keep their lives as they wish them.'

"The Professor smiled. 'Your people might be very happy to meet with others from outside the Breast of the Mother. My people have many things which could make life easier for them.'

"Sankarana smiled right back at him. 'But our lives are so easy now, I cannot believe that your things could make more happiness for us.'

"But we have machines that do the work of many men.'

"But then our men should be idle. And idleness is not a happy thing.'

"We have medicines to cure the sick.'

"We are very seldom sick, and when we are sick we heal ourselves, or we die if that is what is to be.'

"The Professor was getting a little panicky now. 'But your people should come out into the world! They should have the opportunity to better themselves!'

"How may they become better by going into your world?"

"The Professor was sputtering a little. 'Why, we have scientific learning! We have

art! We have motion pictures and ocean liners and trains and airplanes and—'

"Sankarana held up her hand. 'I am sure, Mr. Professor, that these are things that make you very proud. But our people have come to us and let their wishes be known, and we must ask you, when you go back to your own people, that you do not bring them here.'

"The Professor wasn't happy about that!

"You will always be welcome among us, for you are good men. But we have lived for long in our own ways, and we love them and wish to keep them. Years beyond counting have we lived here. Our first mothers and fathers brought us here into the Breast of the Mother so that we might not be destroyed by other peoples. We are their children, and we too do not wish to be destroyed. We have made our decision, and here we will remain.' She smiled at him. 'I know this will not please you, and I am so sorry for it, but you must give us your promise to hold your tongue when you go.'

"The Professor sat there a long time, with his face getting redder and redder. Then Ruprecht said, 'Mother Sankarana, Professor Gummy is a good man and a wise man, and I ask that you let him think upon

this before he gives you his promise. He will make you a wise answer, I know.'

"Sankarana nodded and everybody stood up and went about their business. Ruprecht helped the Professor stand—you could see he was all mixed up between being mad and being scared and being ready to cry. Ruprecht took him outside and we walked over to one of the waterfalls. Up on the terrace above us some of the village kids were picking guava fruit and singing a song that wasn't from the show, running around playing. Further up men were hoeing rows of beans. Ruprecht put his hand on the Professor's shoulder.

"Professor Gummy, what will you do?"

"The Professor was huffing like he'd run a mile. 'But dear God, dear God, what *can* I do? This is the most important discovery of the century! I can't — I can't just forget what we've found!'

"Ruprecht smiled. 'Can you bring yourself to destroy this?' He waved his hand at the beautiful landscape, the terraces, the glaciers, the stone buildings. Above us a herd of llamas was grazing along the steep walls of the mountain, where thick grass grew in bright green patches. Down below, women were sitting

outside their doors spinning llama wool into yarn and thread, or pounding corn into meal, or gossiping. You couldn't ask for a prettier, more peaceful picture. 'That's what you would be doing, you know. Once let our colleagues know of this, and there will be no hope for these people. They'll have to change, just to survive. They'll have to go away, and this place will be torn up, stone by stone, studied, catalogued, trucked away to museums. There'll be nothing left. This will be a dead place. Just another dead civilization, wiped out in the name of knowledge.' He looked at the Professor. 'Can you do that to these people?'

"The Professor was real upset. 'But dear God. Dear God. I'm a scientist!'

"Yes. But you're also a man, and a good man. Don't kill this beautiful thing just to dissect it.'

"The Professor looked at him. 'But Edward, my boy, how can we keep it quiet? How can we not talk about it when we return?'

"Ruprecht smiled. 'As for myself, that will be very easy, for I'm not going back with you.'

“Well, you would have thought he hit the Professor upside the head with a shovel, the poor guy looked so shocked.

“But — but you can’t stay here!”

“I can and will.’ He blushed and looked sheepish. ‘They’ve offered me a part. Monckton has asked me to play Detlef, as old Caryll’s looking to retire. And I’ll understudy his own role, too, the Prince, to take it on when he is done with it.’

“The Professor looked lost. You had to feel sorry for the guy. Everything he’d dreamed was right here, in his hands, but he couldn’t keep hold of it.

“The Professor looked around him. ‘The things they must know, they history they must have.’ He sighed. And I guess he’d made his decision.

“That same night Ruprecht was up there on stage, singing, ‘*Come, sir, will you join our noble Saxon Corps?*’ Word perfect. He’d been practicing. He was a hit with the audience, and Emilio looked real proud of him, too. After the show Monckton threw a big dinner for us all and congratulated Ruprecht on what a quick study he was.

“I’m not really a quick study,’ Ruprecht said. He was acting shy all of a sudden, not like his old self. But which of us was?

‘When I was twelve a touring company of *The Student Prince* played in Taos, and I saw every single performance the two weeks they were there. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.’

“Then the old companies are still playing?” Helen asked. ‘How lovely!’

“Oh, yes!” Ruprecht said. ‘There are still companies playing the little towns, and every now and then one makes it into New York or Los Angeles for short run. You know what they say — “The sun never sets on a company of *The Student Prince*.”’

“They used to say that of *Blossom Time*!” Kathie laughed.

Next day we left, the Professor, the college kid, and me. The mother made us promise to keep our mouths shut, and fine by me. Just another treasure I wouldn’t lose on the horses. She gave us gifts of fruits and cloth. Masalito and Detlef — the villagers tended to name their kids after characters in the show—took us back down the tunnel. We made it across the river again without too much trouble. Amilcare was glad to see us. I think he was getting worried about his pay. He welcomed me

back and shook my hand and said, ‘Boss, what did you see in there?’

“I just looked at him and said, ‘Oh, nothing. Nothing much at all.’

“But where is Emilio? And the tall funny man?”

“I just told him they had work to do and wouldn’t be back for a while. Amilcare didn’t ask questions. I was the boss.

“We started back for La Paz, but we weren’t even off the plain when we heard a rumbling noise and a crash. I looked back and saw a little plume of smoke or dust coming up from the base of the mountain, where the tunnel was. Looks like they just wanted to make sure we kept our promise. Which kind of bugged the Professor. ‘You’d think they could have trusted me more than that,’ he growled. ‘Or at least have waited till we were out of sight.’

I always wondered how anyone got into that line of work — adventuring.

“Oh, I used to read a lot when I was a kid,” Jerky Pete said. The words were slurring now, it wouldn’t be long before we’d make that reeling trip up the stairs to his miserably crammed studio apartment.

“Read every book I could get my hands on, the wilder the better. Edgar Rice Burroughs, Kline, Haggard, Rohmer, all that crap. Read too damn much. Haven’t opened a book again since I turned 25. Who has time? Anyway, books can’t compete with the world, you know,” he mused in a suddenly soft voice. And he hummed a little, “*Golden days . . .*”

“Yes, we writers don’t get the audiences we used to since TV and Nintendo and virtual reality came in.”

“Virtual reality my ass!” Peter exploded. Nearby, a couple of Armani’s on cellphones raised their eyebrows. “I’m talking Reality, bud, the one with the capital R-R-R-R at the top!” He grabbed his margarita. “Nothing competes with it for sheer mind-boggling fun and fear. For instance, did I ever tell you . . .”

And so begins another tale.

